

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 46
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 2016*

Article 3

Winter 12-1-2016

The Army's Identity Crisis

Gates Brown

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [National Security Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gates Brown, "The Army's Identity Crisis," *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (2016), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2994.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

The Army's Identity Crisis

Gates Brown

© 2017 *Gates Brown*

ABSTRACT: While examining effective and ineffective examples of Army modernization, this article explains the importance of focusing efforts on combined arms maneuver warfare with a near-peer competitor.

The Army suffers from an identity crisis: by training forces for all types of wars it ends up lessening combat effectiveness across the entire spectrum. Instead of preparing inadequately for every war, the Army needs to focus on a specific skill set and hone it to a sharp edge. Aware of the risks of preparing for an incorrect type of war, the Army recovered from the consequences of such miscalculations in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and more recently, in Iraq and Afghanistan. In short, a well-defined Army can scramble to remedy known deficiencies in combat operations; however, consciously choosing not to set a deliberate course will not serve the Army well.

The Pentomic era of the 1950s and early 1960s as well as the Active Defense and AirLand Battle era of the late 1970s and 1980s provide examples of previous attempts to address this problem. These cases differ in that implementing weapons platforms of the new operational framework during the 1970s and early 1980s were feasible while the Pentomic Division foundered due to matériel and doctrinal problems. Any new operational concept, therefore, should address approaches toward the most serious threat to the United States, appropriate weapons platforms, units, and strategic mobility for these threats.

The primary focus of modernization efforts should be the threat of a near-peer competitor, such as China or Russia. A near-peer competitor is a state or a state-like actor that can challenge US strategic interests or America's ability to influence or protect its strategic interests. China and Russia are currently the most likely near-peer competitor states; they have the ability to challenge US strategic interests in their region. A near-peer competitor does not have to have the capability to challenge the United States globally, but if it can challenge America in a region that is of vital interest, such as Europe or the South China Sea, then it is a potential near-peer threat.

China has the capability to challenge US dominance in the South China Sea; it is building islands to extend its sovereign waters and its airpower projection capability. Similarly, Russia's expansion into Eastern Europe showed the inability of the United States to check such aggression. America's interests in Europe focus on Central and Western Europe; however, without an effective counter to Russian aggression, other ways to shore up the confidence of its allies in the region will have

Dr. Gates Brown, an assistant professor of military history at the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, served with the 2nd Infantry and the 82nd Airborne Divisions.

to be found. The Islamic State is not a near-peer competitor because it has limited ability to project power beyond the Middle East.

The Pentomic Division

During the 1950s, the Army faced a problem much like today's need to describe its current contribution to national security. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's security policy, known as the New Look, focused American military efforts on a strong nuclear deterrent while reducing conventional forces. General Maxwell D. Taylor, the US Army chief of staff from 1955 through 1959, advocated the pentomic concept to describe how the Army would fight on an atomic battlefield. Although the concept was flawed, it proved the Army could make a cogent argument for a new role in national security.

Unfortunately, two important reasons prevented Taylor's efforts from leading to more resources for the Army. First, the security situation—the building conflict in South Vietnam, instability in Eastern Europe, and the Suez Crisis—was not conducive to expanding preparations for limited war. Moreover, the context of the Cold War militated against directly involving US forces—the risk of war with the Soviet Union was too high for the United States to become decisively involved in a limited conflict outside the US strategic perimeter.

Taylor could not change that security paradigm; however, today's Army leaders do not have such constraints. There is no nation analogous to the Soviet Union in terms of its ability to deter US involvement in limited conflicts on the global stage. This means any decision to deploy ground troops would be based on the relative importance of the region or nation to US interests instead of how that conflict might increase tension with another superpower. This latitude provides more freedom of maneuver, but it also lowers the bar for involvement in limited wars, which in turn, makes properly preparing the Army for future conflict even more pressing.

Army leaders could use global instability as the foundation of an argument for a strong ground force. There are many different security threats ranging from near-peer competitors, such as Russia or China, to terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State. Currently, Army leaders claim to prepare for conflicts across the full spectrum of conflict; however, this spreads resources too thin and requires the Army to have too many disparate missions. Rather than facing the impossibility of building a coherent force structure backed by new matériel that could wage counterinsurgency operations and maneuver warfare against a near-peer competitor with the same type of units, weapons systems, and training requirements, Army leaders should identify the most direct threat to the nation and focus their efforts and acquisitions programs on meeting that threat. Having a clear agenda presents Congressional leaders with a more compelling argument.

Although the strategic context of the Cold War complicated Taylor's advocacy for a larger ground force, this was not the only reason the pentomic force struggled. The pentomic concept required increased

aviation assets, such as convertiplanes similar to the V-22 Osprey.¹ The rationale for convertiplanes was solid: pentomic forces needed mobility on the atomic battlefield to mitigate the effects of a nuclear weapon as well as the ability to mass quickly and fight the enemy. The operational tilt-rotor aircraft the pentomic concept required, however, took almost 60 years to reach the military. Similar problems, as discussed below, arose with the Future Combat Systems program (2003–9).

During Eisenhower's administration, the Army was in a secondary position in terms of national security that made the risk of trying the Pentomic Division acceptable, at least insofar as it attempted to wedge the Army into the new defense policy. Today's Army leaders, however, do not face similar constraints. Rather, current political leaders understand the protracted nature of limited wars all too well. No serious political leader or defense analyst argues the Army is obsolete.² Today's Army leaders need to make the most of this opportunity. By providing direction, they help guide political leaders to understand the important security risks the nation faces, which is why future planning must include a clear link between matériel and doctrine. As Army leaders discovered in the late 1950s, providing an unrealistic proposal will not garner support in the executive or legislative branches.

Active Defense and AirLand Battle

An example of a successful orientation is the Army of the late 1970s and early 1980s. General William E. DePuy used his position as commander of the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) to incorporate the experiences of the Yom Kippur War (1973) into US doctrine. DePuy's first iteration, Active Defense, soon shifted to AirLand Battle, which focused analysis on defending Europe and on concentrating effects to attrite Soviet forces as they invaded areas defended by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.³ Since victory required well-trained and well-led troops, the new doctrine focused on the soldier, including the acquisition of new weapons systems such as the M1 Abrams tank, the M2 Bradley fighting vehicle, and the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, which gave military forces the capability to fight the type of war doctrine described. Both Active Defense and AirLand Battle assumed the main enemy was the Soviet Union and the battlefield would likely be Central Europe.⁴

Army leaders today do not have the clarity of a Cold War adversary to frame their threat assessments; however, the lack of a clear enemy should not stop Army leaders from orienting their efforts to counter the most

1 General Maxwell D. Taylor, "I'm Glad to Be in the Army" (speech, First Annual Meeting of the Association of the United States Army, October 22, 1955), National Defense University Digital Archives, 16–18, <https://digitalndulibrary.ndu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/taylor/id/125/rec/3> (accessed February 19, 2016).

2 A. J. Bacevich, *The Pentomic Era: The U.S. Army between Korea and Vietnam* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1986), 19–21.

3 Ingo Trauschweizer, *The Cold War U.S. Army: Building Deterrence for Limited War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 205–14. The introduction of Active Defense and its evolution to AirLand Battle embodied the shift from a matériel centric view of warfare to one that incorporated soldiers and their weapons systems into a cohesive intellectual framework. For a more detailed discussion of this evolution, see Harold R. Winton, "Partnership and Tension: The Army and Air Force Between Vietnam and Desert Shield," *Parameters* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 100–119.

4 Walter E. Kretchik, *U.S. Army Doctrine: From the American Revolution to the War on Terror* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 197–209.

dangerous or most likely threats. Army leaders should continue to focus on warfare as a human endeavor. The *US Army Operating Concept* makes this point clear; though it is often lost in the vagaries of budget debates.⁵ Decreased forces mean decreased resources for ground conflicts and influencing their outcomes. Any new conception of how the Army fights must communicate soldiers, not weapons, are key to success. Weapons enhance the individual soldier but cannot replace them. There are no quick and easy solutions a new weapons platform will offer that will remove the threat of losing soldiers in combat. Thus, the nation's political leaders should understand the ramifications of sending the Army into combat as well as the implications of creating a force unprepared for war due to a lack of funding or troops.

Recently, the Army attempted to frame fighting war in the twenty-first century through the Future Combat Systems (FCS) program. The effort failed because it was too expensive, lacked feasible weapons systems, and did not fit the strategic context. A RAND study on the reasons for the failure concluded foundational assumptions did not align with the realities of combat. Also, the acquisition requirements the Army generated were unreasonable. These problems were similar to the Pentomic Division in the late 1950s. Due to the Future Combat System's size and complexities, it became unwieldy and the costs were no longer worth the perceived benefits.⁶

One thing the Future Combat System effort did well was to articulate a path ahead for acquisitions. This clarity was also fundamental to establishing the success of the AirLand Battle Army that proved so effective in Desert Storm; however, platforms are only part of the equation in determining the efficacy of a fighting force and do no good if they only exist on the drawing board. In a new vision, Army leaders should identify platforms that are almost ready or are available for fielding to provide confidence in any new doctrine and to connect funding and capability. If legislators have a definitive program outlining not only the security issues but also the weapons platforms addressing those problems, they can more easily understand the consequences of reduced funding. When legislators cut funds from a program decades from realization, immediate budget constraints overwhelm platforms the Army needs in the relatively distant future.

A Way Ahead

To determine how best to address national security issues, the United States first needs a prioritized list of security concerns. With these priorities helping to determine where and how to distribute risk, resource allocations become clearer. Risks will not disappear even if the decision is to continue training for the entire spectrum of conflict. In fact, having too broad of a focus invites just as much risk as too narrow of a focus.

Currently, the Army's Unified Land Operations doctrine characterizes the main threats to the United States as either a "nonstate entity

⁵ US Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World, 2020–2040*, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-3-1 (Fort Eustis, VA: Headquarters, TRADOC, 2014), 8–9.

⁶ Christopher G. Pernin et al., *Lessons from the Army's Future Combat Systems Program* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 247–51.

possessing weapons of mass destruction or other unique methods to challenge US dominance by attacking the public will” or “a nuclear-capable nation-state partnered with one or more nonstate actors through ideological, religious, political, or other ties.”⁷ The second threat combines the dangers of a near-peer competitor’s conventional force with a sophisticated irregular force, two adversaries requiring different efforts to address. The standard logic of deterrence theory, especially when it assumes each side has similar atomic capabilities, does not apply in this situation: a nonstate actor armed with nuclear weapons would not make this fact known prior to an attack because deterrence is most effective if the cost of aggression is more than the cost of inaction. Namely, nonstate actors who find producing or maintaining even a small nuclear arsenal difficult, let alone garnering an arsenal analogous to that of the United States, face greater risks by making public their possession of nuclear weapons to deter aggression than by publicizing the weapons after use.⁸

Since regular Army units could do little to counter a nonstate actor with a nuclear weapon, which is a task for special operations, a nonstate nuclear armed entity is not relevant for the entire Army and the second threat outlined in *Unified Land Operations* should drive Army planning. Although defining the threat is valuable, that alone is insufficient. We need clarity about the type of conflict the Army should prepare for. A broad range of operations could require Army involvement; it would be difficult, if not impossible, for a force the size of the US Army to be proficient across the entire spectrum. As recently made clear, when Army leaders identify a capability gap, they will make every effort to close it—for example, during Operations Enduring Freedom (2001–14) and Iraqi Freedom (2003–10), the Army changed the focus of its combat training centers to concentrate on counterinsurgency operations. Notably, this shift reduced the emphasis on maneuver warfare and decreased total force proficiency with this type of conflict.

Even though the entire spectrum of conflict requires different, possibly contradictory, skills, the size of the force does not allow for large-scale specialization of units without decreasing the overall capability of the force. Also, if a sizable conflict—on the order of the Persian Gulf War (1990–91) or Operation Iraqi Freedom—did occur, any specialization would become meaningless because units would have to fight in the ongoing war.

Counterinsurgency operations require significant investments of time and personnel. Even after years of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, US forces were unable to provide long-term stability. Counterinsurgencies, unless they follow an invasion, will be at the invitation of the host nation and would allow advanced notice. Conversely, high-intensity conflicts, especially with near-peer competitors have not normally permitted prolonged periods of preparation. Any potential aggressor is unlikely to allow US forces to build up over a period of months as Iraq did in 1991.

7 Headquarters, US Department of the Army (HQDA), *Unified Land Operations*, Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 3-0 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2011), 4.

8 Robert Powell, *Nuclear Deterrence Theory: The Search for Credibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 10–12.

The Army could find itself having to maneuver forces quickly to gain access to the theater and only subsequently engage enemy forces. Such a high-risk operation affords little time for home-station training. Also, this type of operation requires specialized weapons platforms. A clear doctrinal framework establishing feasible requirements could provide guidance for such systems, however, timely creation of such systems is not likely without such a model.

Although choosing a specific type of conflict requires assuming risk, failing to make a choice also incurs risk. Due to long acquisition timelines, most of the risk lies with not making clear decisions. Weapons platforms are adaptable to an extent; however, a force can only adapt *existing* weapons platforms. The main elements of US landpower are decades old, and there is no clear direction for new platforms.

For these reasons, Army leaders should focus the Army's mission, acquisition strategy, and training efforts for the active force to fight a high-intensity conflict. Prepared for this type of conflict, the Army will be ready to face the most dangerous threat to the nation. Conversely, if Army leaders continue advocating for forces prepared to fight across the spectrum of possible conflicts, then it is entirely possible that the Army might find itself without the proper weapons platforms or capabilities to fight a near-peer competitor. As Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, made clear in the 1970s, the Army cannot count on the luxury of losing its first battles any more; it must be ready to win from the beginning.⁹

9 HQDA, *Operations*, Field Manual (FM) 100-5 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 1977), 1-1, <http://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/utis/getdownloaditem/collection/p4013coll9/id/39/filename/40.pdf/mapsto/pdf/type/compoundobject/cpdtype/monograph/show/39> (accessed March 19, 2016).